Free Press Opinion: Chattanooga family learns the rest of the story about uncle's WWII connection

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When Ruth Webb died in 2007, she thought the story on her late brother, Jack Clark, her only sibling, had been written.

Lt. Jack Clark, a second lieutenant in the Army, disappeared on June 25, 1943, when his B-17 was hit during a bombing run over the North Sea while on the way to a target in Bremen, Germany. The remains of Clark, a Chattanoogan and the plane's bombardier, were never found.

After a year, he was declared legally dead, and for many years Webb never knew what happened to her brother.

"For all those years," she said in 1991, "It added to the sorrow of losing him not to know what happened."

However, several members of the crew made it out of the plane alive, and Webb later made contact with one of them, John Brown, who said her brother "may have saved my life" by kicking open a sticky escape hatch door. Her brother, he said, also had been the best man at his wedding.

"Our crew was not just a flying crew," he said, "but were very close

friends."

Webb and Brown, who was taken to a prisoner of war camp after parachuting into the sea and being picked up by a German patrol board, exchanged several letters. To accentuate her information about her brother's service, Webb's son, Dick, took her to see a B-17 when one was on display at a local air show. And the two of them compiled extensive scrapbooks on all they'd learned.

As the country prepares to mark Memorial Day tomorrow, and country's 250th birthday on July 4, the United States is losing numerous World War II veterans daily. Estimates in 2025 were that only around 45,000 of the 16.4 million who served in the war remained. Indeed, the threads connecting their service to today's generation are tenuous.

Since Clark never returned from the war, all Webb had, and all her children had, were scrapbooks full of memories.

That was all, that is, until 2025, when they learned — as broadcaster Paul Harvey used to intone — "the rest of the story."

It turns out a woman in the Netherlands, Judith Bouwens, had contacted the 100th Bomb Group Foundation to learn more about Lt.

Clark. Dutch citizens, in grateful thanks to the United States for helping liberate their country during the war, adopt the graves or names of U.S. service members at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten. Bouwens and her family had been given Clark's name, which is on the Wall of the Missing, and they had been taking flowers to the wall in his memory on the Netherlands' Liberation Day and U.S. Memorial Day. But Bouwens wanted to know more.

Matt Mabe, a volunteer at the 100th Bomb Group Foundation, discovered a 1991 Chattanooga Times story about Ruth Webb's search for information about her brother, and that, in turn, led him to her son.

"Mom was at peace" about all she had learned, Dick Webb, 73, said, "and we thought the story was closed."

However, on June 2, 2025, Webb received a letter from Bouwens explaining their connection. "In this way," she wrote, "we try to do our part to keep the memory alive of what your boys did for our freedom. In these times, that seems more important than ever. Jack feels to us a bit like family — someone we take special care of."

The married Chattanooga father and grandfather — who still works

full-time for Goodwill after retiring from CBL & Associates — was astonished and grateful.

"I didn't know what to think," Dick Webb said. "I was extremely surprised."

In the ensuing year, the Bouwens family and Webb have communicated extensively through email and WhatsApp, and Webb now considers himself their "adopted nephew."

He learned that Bouwens' grandmother, Josephina Bouwens-Willems, initially adopted the grave of a U.S. serviceman shortly after the end of the war, as soon as it became possible, and tended it for years and years. Now Bouwens, a teacher, in addition to carrying on her grandmother's tradition, also takes her students to the cemetery to put a personal face on what is more than 80-year-old history.

"It's been quite a little adventure," said Webb, a U.S. Army Reserve veteran. "I never knew Jack, but I'm always proud to tell his story."

In July when the U.S. celebrates its semiquincentennial birthday, Webb will fly to the Netherlands to meet Bouwens, 49, and her family. He plans to bring along his uncle's Purple Heart, which Clark was awarded posthumously. Earlier, he sent Bouwens his uncle's

bombardier wings in thanks for what she and her family do.

Webb said the trip will put the "final page" on the scrapbooks he and his mother made, which are now updated with the correspondence with Bouwens.

"I can hardly wait," he said. "We have become basically family."

With the passing of service members from World War II and all the country's subsequent wars, it's important to remember not only what those who made the sacrifice did, but who they were. Ruth Webb and her son thought they had done just that, only to find out there was more to the story.

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Clint Cooper is the Free Press editor at the Chattanooga Times Free Press, representing the conservative side of the newspaper's opinion section. Previously he worked as the religion editor, assistant sports editor and Metro and Lifestyles staff writer for the newspaper.

Clint has received numerous honors over the years for his writing and design including first place awards for Best Editorials and Best Single Editorial from the Tennessee Press Association.

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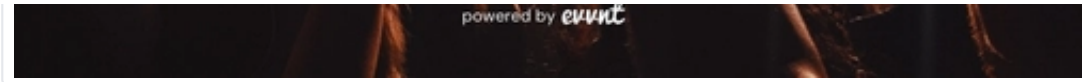

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